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Wolf Warrior 2: Imagining the Chinese Century

Chris Berry

Pundits have been whipping up expectations about “the Chinese century” in a never-ending flow of books with titles like *When China Rules the World* and *China Goes Global*.¹ In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping articulated his vision for a global trade network under the odd name of “Belt and Road Initiative”. This is shorthand for the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, and it harks back to past glories.² Global trading interests require a global military presence, and in 2017, China opened its first overseas military base in Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa.³ How has Chinese cinema responded to these developments?

Chinese filmmakers have few local precedents to draw on. For most of its history, China has been busy trying to stop other people from coming in. You might remember, that is why the Great Wall of China was built. When Mary Farquhar and I were writing about Chinese cinematic encounters with foreigners in the movies a dozen years ago, the only examples from the People’s Republic we could think of were about foreigners who came to China.⁴ Even when the “reform and opening up” (*gaige kaifang*) policy was launched in the late 1970s, the anticipation was foreign things coming into China: Deng Xiaoping allegedly tried to mollify worries about what might come along with investment by saying, “When you open the window, a few flies are bound to get in.” But now, the direction of travel has changed outwards. For narratives moving in this direction, the only major Chinese precedent is the Monkey King legend of going to India to get the Buddhist sutras. Unsurprisingly, numerous Monkey King films have been made in recent years, but what about stories in the present?

For contemporary Chinese movies, setting at least one scene overseas has become *de rigueur*. Take the phenomenally successfully but critically reviled *Tiny Times* (*Xiao Shidai*) franchise as an example.⁵ Sometimes characterized as “*Sex and the City* without the sex,” its chic protagonists confined their big spending to Shanghai in the first couple of instalments. But when the third arrived at the box office in 2014, it opened with a shopping trip to Rome – not for any narrative reason, but just because they could. Having whole stories set overseas is rare, with the exception of travel romances. But even these films just use exotic locations as backdrops, avoiding narratives about actual Chinese encounters with foreigners and, somewhat implausibly, confining the romance to Chinese men and women. Why travel all the way from Beijing to Paris if you are just going to get together with a guy from Shanghai?

Films that represent the country’s global military presence have been few and far between and not particularly successful at the box office. But all that changed last year with *Wolf Warrior 2* (*Zhanlang 2*), a phenomenally successful *Rambo*-style action adventure. Set in a failing state that is anonymous, it nevertheless appears—by no coincidence, I suspect—to be somewhere around the Horn of Africa. Given the setting and China’s own anxieties about its Central Asian province of Xinjiang, it is not surprising to discover the main villains are Islamic extremist insurgents. Less predictably, the insurgents are also employing American mercenaries.

Commentators have been struck by *Wolf Warrior 2*’s borrowings from Hollywood. Given the lack of a local tradition of military adventure or stories about military adventures, it makes sense for Chinese filmmakers to turn to Hollywood for ideas in this genre especially. Indeed, as I will explain, a lot of the criticism of the film has focused on how it adopts what detractors feel is the worst of Western culture. Understandable though that may be, the film has clearly struck some chords with local audiences, and I want to try and figure out what some of those are.

Wolf Warrior 2 stars and is directed by Wu Jing. That is the first of many ways it resembles Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo*. Rambo is a highly skilled but "troubled" former U.S. Special Forces soldier. In *Wolf Warrior 2*, Wu Jing's character Leng Feng ("Cold Front") is also a "troubled" former special ops soldier. The original *Wolf Warrior* (2015) traces the inability to follow orders and restrain himself in the face of injustice that got him thrown out which is also not unlike Rambo. Now Leng is a trader in Africa, with an adopted local son/sidekick, Tundu. As the country spirals out of control, the Chinese navy turns up to save Chinese citizens, but they are constrained by orders not to intervene on foreign soil. Leng, however, sets off by himself for the interior. First, he rescues the associates of a murdered Chinese doctor who was developing a vaccine for an Ebola-like illness. Then he saves the Chinese and African workers, including Tundu's mother, in Chinese-run factory. The film ends when he gets everyone to the safety of a Chinese warship.

The first *Wolf Warrior* film was a modest success, but it was completely eclipsed by its successor. At number 61, *Wolf Warrior 2* is the only Chinese film in Box Office Mojo's global all-time top 100.⁶ Not only does that mean it tops the Chinese all-time box office with a take of 5.679 billion *yuan* (approximately US\$830 million at the time of writing). It also places it far ahead of its nearest rival, Dante Lam's *Operation Red Sea* (*Honghai Xingdong*, 2018), which is in the vein of *Wolf Warrior 2* and "only" pulled in 3.65 billion *yuan* (US\$533 million), or a third less than *Wolf Warrior 2*'s total.⁷ Given its "patriotic" content and the tagline, "Whoever offends the Chinese will be wiped out, no matter how far away," it is not surprising to learn that nearly all those earnings were made inside China, and the film barely exported at all.

Some of the frequent criticisms levelled at the film might suggest that its success is largely down to translating some of the worst elements of Hollywood culture into a Chinese context. These criticisms have been made both in China and outside. First, Leng Feng's

psychotic behaviour has been noted as an example of “toxic masculinity” that resolves problems through out of control violence. Second, Africa appears yet again as chaotic and violent, with the local women and children in need of protection from foreign men: Leng Feng appears to have taken on the classic Orientalist “white man’s burden.”⁸

Nevertheless, *Wolf Warrior 2* does show signs of being shaped by Chinese concerns and conditions as much as by Hollywood. The target of Leng’s anger is not coincidental. Just as Bruce Lee works his way through villains of various ethnicities before taking on a white guy in the final showdown of his films, so Leng Feng does much the same in *Wolf Warrior 2*. In the end, he faces off with the evil American mercenary, Big Daddy, and beats him to death in an episode when his Rambo-like inability to control his righteous anger is displayed to full effect. I am told many audiences go wild for this scene, but to others it seems disturbingly psychotic.

To understand the reasons for this focus on beating the white guy, we must understand China’s history. Indeed, in the final showdown in *Wolf Warrior 2*, Big Daddy presses the Chinese audience’s buttons by telling Leng Feng that, “People like you will always be inferior to people like me,” to which Leng Feng answers, “That’s fucking history.”⁹ Then, triggered, he launches into his frenzied attack. This exchange resonates with the idea of China’s humiliation and the need to overcome it. Mao famously dated the beginnings of modern Chinese history to the nineteenth-century Opium Wars, when British gunboats forced the country open.¹⁰ Officially, the “century of humiliation” ended when Japan was defeated, followed soon after by the establishment of the People’s Republic in 1949, but President Xi Jinping invokes it almost often as part of his effort to whip up patriotic fervor.¹¹

The ending of the film has also captured attention. A picture of a Chinese passport appears, accompanied by the message: “Citizens of the People’s Republic of China, when

you encounter danger in a foreign land, do not give up! Please remember, at your back stands a strong motherland.” Why the need for such a statement? Until relatively recently, very few citizens of the People’s Republic ever went overseas. Over the last decade, students and businessmen from China have been travelling all over the world. Chinese outbound tourism has undergone “explosive growth,” making it the most important outbound tourism market, spending more than twice its nearest rival, the United States.¹²

The final title speaks to both a general anxiety about going overseas as a new experience, and a more specific anxiety about the capacity of the Chinese government to really come to the assistance of its citizens in times of trouble. In this regard, when the Chinese navy sent ships to rescue not only its own but also foreign nationals for the first time in 2015, it made big headlines in China. Again, in relation to the setting of *Wolf Warrior 2*, it is no coincidence that the rescue was from Yemen.¹³

Another scene that has caught attention and provoked discussion on the Chinese internet occurs in the factory rescue episode. The factory owner’s initial response is to separate the Chinese citizens, who are to be rescued, from the local workers, who include Tundu’s mother. Not only Leng but, as Lisa Rofel points out, all the characters with People’s Liberation Army training, reject this division and insist that everyone associated with the Chinese-owned plant will be saved.¹⁴ This moment resonates with class tensions inside China, where an ever-growing wealth gap has been undermining the acceptability of Deng Xiaoping’s 1985 idea of “letting some people get rich first.”¹⁵ While this might seem like a subversive moment, it is fully in line with the policies of Xi Jinping’s regime, which has used not only nationalism but an anti-corruption campaign drawing on resentment of the rich to bolster its legitimacy.¹⁶ It also reinforces the idea of China as the friend of the African people and not new colonialists, which has its lineage back to the aid China gave to countries like Ghana, Zambia and Tanzania in the Mao era.¹⁷

The rebellious, even individualistic, character of Leng is nevertheless striking. One can only speculate about why *Wolf Warrior 2* did quite so much better than *Operation Red Sea*. Both films are assertions of Chinese martial might, but the latter is about a naval operation, whereas the former focuses on a lone wolf. For all of *Wolf Warrior 2*'s patriotism, that addition of a certain autonomy from the state is noteworthy, especially in combination with immense patriotism. It suggests that the issue of individualistic masculinity remains a hot issue in China and that it holds a particular appeal to many audiences, making it worth more attention.

I can remember when the original *Rambo—First Blood* (1982) film was released in the People's Republic of China in 1985, when I was living in Beijing. As reported at the time, long-term foreign residents in China, most of whom were committed to the ideals of Maoist socialism, were appalled that a film they saw as promoting American violence and imperialism should ever have been shown in China.¹⁸ However, I also recall a short letter appearing in the local press from a young man who responded by explaining that, for him, Rambo was an appealingly different kind of hero, because he did what he thought was right and did not simply follow orders. Friends resisted my own rejection of the film with similar claims.

But we should hesitate before jumping to the conclusion the appeal of the Rambo-style *Wolf Warrior* hero means a Chinese version of jingoistic American masculinity is taking off. It is important that Leng is located outside the People's Republic of China and has been banished from the Chinese armed forces because of his failure to obey commands. This pattern invokes a much older model. Kam Louie famously argues that in Chinese culture, there are two positive models of masculinity. One, refined and cultured or *wen* masculinity, is typified by the scholar-gentleman, a soft figure of great learning with no aggressive characteristics. The other, martial or *wu* masculinity, is closer to what we think of as *macho*

masculinity. Perhaps surprisingly to Western readers, it is the former of the two models that is represented as hot and attractive to women, whereas the latter must suppress desire completely in order to be an effective warrior. Furthermore, the *wen* man rules the kingdom and the home, whereas the *wu* man acts in the space outside civilization to secure its borders and chase down wrongdoers. That space is well known to martial arts film fans as the *jianghu* or rivers-and-lakes outlaw world.¹⁹

With this dual model of masculinity in mind, perhaps we can see that as well as Rambo, Leng in *Wolf Warrior 2* is also drawing on the *wu* model of macho masculinity. But, as a response to the need to come up with new narratives that respond to China's new global role, the space of the *jianghu* is no longer inside China. Instead, in this film, Africa is the new *jianghu*. This redistribution of the cultural imagination raises some interesting questions about how China imagines the world outside China and its role in that world. In contrast to the strict self-control and ethical behaviour expected in the world of civilisation, as martial arts fans will know very well, in the *jianghu* anything goes in the effort to defeat one's enemies and protect one's friends. Leng's almost psychotic behaviour is quite acceptable if that is what it takes to win in the *jianghu* that is Africa. From the perspective articulated in *Wolf Warrior 2*, is the world outside the People's Republic the *jianghu*? Are the rest of simply part of an outlaw world where anything goes in the drive to win?

While you are thinking that over, one final point on how the Chinese resonances of Leng's Rambo-derived character might also have something to do with his appeal. Leng is not only a *wu* man, but he also resembles the Monkey, who is the great trickster archetype of Chinese culture. In the original myth, Monkey is accompanying the Chinese monk Tripitaka on his journey to India, along with two other helper characters, Sandy and Pigsy. But it is Monkey who dominates in their numerous adventures along the way. Just like Leng, he is absolutely loyal and endowed with all sorts of superhuman fighting skills. But he is also

impulsive, inclined to anger, and loses control of himself. For that, he is often punished, again, much like Leng. In a way, *Wolf Warrior 2* is like one of the episodes of *Monkey King* where Monkey has been banished and must prove himself again in order to be forgiven. This process is not just a matter of testing Monkey's martial skills, but also his ethical worth. Has Leng done enough to be redeemed? No doubt we will find out in *Wolf Warrior 3*.

¹ Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The End of the Western World and the Birth of a New Global Order* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2012); David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² Tom Philips, "The \$900bn Question: What Is the Belt and Road Initiative?," *The Guardian* 12 May 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/12/the-900bn-question-what-is-the-belt-and-road-initiative>, accessed 14 September 2018.

³ Voice of America, "China Opens First Overseas Military Base," <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-overseas-military-base/4099717.html>, accessed 14 September 2018.

⁴ Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, "Accommodating Foreigners: Cherishing Men from Afar," in *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 175-180.

⁵ Ying Zhu and Frances Hisgen, "A Rite of Passage to Nowhere: 'Tiny Times,' Chinese Cinema, and Chinese Women" *China File*, 15 July 2013, <http://www.chinafile.com/rite-passage-nowhere>, accessed 15 September 2018.

⁶ <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>, accessed 14 September 2018.

⁷ <http://www.cbooo.cn/Alltimedomestic>, accessed 14 September 2018.

⁸ For example, see Xiang Zairong, “Toxic Masculinity with Chinese Characteristics,” *MCLC Resource Center*, 22 February 2018, <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/2018/02/22/wolf-warrior-ii-the-rise-of-china-and-gendersexuality-politics/>, accessed 15 September 2018.

⁹ All dialogue transcribed from the English subtitles.

¹⁰ Mao Tse-tung [Mao Zedong], *The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1960).

¹¹ For example: Xi Jinping, “Address at the Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Victory of the Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the World Anti-Fascist War,” Xinhuanet 3 September 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-09/03/c_134583870.htm, accessed 14 September 2018.

¹² Tracy Chen, “To Understand China’s Growth, Look at Its Tourists,” *Bloomberg Opinion*, 28 January 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-01-29/chinese-tourists-are-reshaping-world-economy>, accessed 15 September 2018.

¹³ Megha Rajagopalan and Ben Blanchard, “China Evacuates Foreign Nationals from Yemen in Unprecedented Move,” Reuters 3 April 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-china/china-evacuates-foreign-nationals-from-yemen-in-unprecedented-move-idUSKBN0MU09M20150403>, accessed 15 September 2018.

¹⁴ Lisa Rofel, “The Said and the Unsaid of the New Worlding of China-Africa-U.S. Relations,” *MCLC Resource Center*, 22 February 2018, <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/2018/02/22/wolf-warrior-ii-the-rise-of-china-and-gendersexuality-politics/>, accessed 15 September 2018.

¹⁵ Gabriel Wildau and Tom Mitchell, “China Income Inequality among World’s Worst,” *Financial Times* 14 January 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/3c521faa-baa6-11e5-a7cc-280dfe875e28>, accessed 15 September 2018.

¹⁶ David Skidmore, “Understanding President Xi’s Anti-Corruption Campaign,” *The Conversation* 27 October 2017, <http://theconversation.com/understanding-chinese-president-xis-anti-corruption-campaign-86396>, accessed 15 September 2018.

¹⁷ Julia C. Strauss, “The Past in the Present: Historical and Rhetorical Lineages in China’s Relations with Africa,” *The China Quarterly* no. 199 (2009): 777-795.

¹⁸ Julian Baum, “Rambo Busts Through China’s ‘Open Door’,” *Christian Science Monitor* 15 October 1985, <https://www.csmonitor.com/1985/1015/oram.html>, accessed 15 September 2018.

¹⁹ Kam Louie, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).